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THE FALL OF SAIGON

by David Butler (Simon & Schuster: \$17.95; 493 pp.)

All of us who took part in the final American evacuation from Vietnam in April, 1975, share a punishment called memory. Being at the Saigon Embassy that last day was like watching a B-52 strike at close range. No longer could those of us in the official American community sustain the illusions that had so often separated us from the consequences of our actions in Vietnam. We could actually see what we'd done—in the terror-stricken faces of the thousands of Vietnamese we were about to abandon just outside the embassy walls.

David Butler, a young NBC stringer who'd spent, cumulatively, a year "in-country" by the time Saigon fell, has given us an account of the two months leading up to the final "helolift" of April 29. He suggests that the experience was as affecting as the Kennedy assassination. Sadly, his book doesn't bear him out. It is so dispassionate that I wondered if he might be deliberately blanking out the awful memories that plague us all. Apart from a pop-music singer whom he touchingly describes in a nightclub scene, the Vietnamese in his story are little more than hard-to-pronounce names. Butler himself is nearly invisible.

But this isn't meant simply as a personal memoir. Butler builds his narrative around the memories of people he brushed past in the evacuation. He seems to be striving for a Saigon version of "Is Paris Burning?" but what he delivers is closer to a low-budget docudrama. He skews or discards facts that don't fit his story line, and invents a hero where there wasn't one. His candidate for that role: our last ambassador to Vietnam, Graham Martin.

As the CIA's last strategy analyst in Saigon and a one-time suitor to Martin's daughter, I knew the ambassador well. Far from being a sickly "David Brinkley" look-alike as Butler describes him, he was a dazzlingly brilliant and Machiavellian figure, devious to a fault, proud of his ability to manipulate Congress and the press, and determined—as one who'd lost a son in Vietnam—not to let the country "go communist."

Martin arrived in mid-1973 when there was still some hope of salvaging the recently negotiated peace agreement and the Saigon regime. And though Watergate soon eroded the power-leverage of the Nixon presidency, he continued to bluff it out, touting American constancy to the South Vietnamese, indulging them in their corruption, and often squelching intelligence that reflected poorly on their morale and capabilities. As Martin would have it (and Butler echoes him), it was only the cutback in U.S. aid, not South Vietnamese corruption and inefficiency, that imperiled Saigon's will and capacity to fight.

When, in early 1975, the illusions came back to haunt, and our allies broke and ran in the face of a North Vietnamese invasion, Martin again blinked at reality. He refused to accept defeat and insisted that one more dollop of U.S. aid would enable Saigon's now non-existent army to nudge the North Vietnamese into a coalition government.

Our best intelligence agents and informants, some of whom I was dealing with, denied this.

Beginning in early April, they warned that the North Vietnamese meant to be in Saigon in a month's time with no pause for negotiations, and were moving troops and an-

ti-aircraft weapons into position to block any airlift or Dunkirk-type escape over the beaches. Logically, Martin should have responded by battenning down our evacuation planning. He didn't. Instead, he became fixed on the illusory prospect of negotiations. Even after he was ordered by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to put the evacuation machinery in place and into gear, he continued to drag his feet, refusing to pack out sensitive embassy files on the very eve of the communist victory. On the day of the final "helolift" itself, there wasn't even a master list in the embassy of the "high-risk" Vietnamese we should evacuate.

Butler rewrites this story to keep Martin's reputation intact. He says that the evacuation ran "at a constantly accelerating rate" through the first three weeks of April—a contention that is flatly disproved by every available statistic. He neglects to mention that Martin refused to OK a step-up of commercial flights into Saigon when there was still time. And he glosses over the fact that Kissinger so lost confidence in Martin that he felt obliged to assemble his own evacuation task force to try to second-guess him. Though Butler is right in saying that Washington officials waited too long in lifting restrictions on the entry of Vietnamese refugees into this country, he fails to recognize that Martin himself stymied such initiatives by refusing to supply Washington with the information and guidance it needed.

Butler tries to buttress his case for the ambassador by excerpting some of his secret cables from Saigon. But the excerpts are highly selective, and the omissions astonishingly broad. From a batch of messages that Martin sent to Washington two weeks before the communist victory, for instance, Butler omits those flourishes that show how absurdly optimistic the ambassador was (such as his prediction that the South Vietnamese were on the verge of an "economic takeoff" and could use a five-year loan).

Reviewed by Frank Snepp

How Butler obtained these bits and pieces of Martin's most secret communications he doesn't say. But since most of the excerpts seem to favor the ambassador, it's not inconceivable that Martin handed them over to Butler himself. On retiring from the State Department, Martin absconded with scores of top-secret documents, so that he could later defend his performance by peddling their secrets self-servingly to gullible historians. The FBI eventually investigated this breach of regulation and security but reportedly was unable to insure recovery of all the papers Martin had lifted from official files. To judge from Butler's book, the ambassador is still at work dishing out once-classified information to cover his mistakes.

Martin admitted to Congress after Saigon's collapse that the pace of the final evacuation had been keyed to the prospects of negotiations and that up until two days before the communists' victory, it was an "open question" for him whether they would negotiate. He said he thought they would. He also conceded, grudgingly, that intelligence provided by an agent inside the communist command contradicted these hopes and heralded an imminent North Vietnamese military victory. All of these items—the doomsday intelligence, Martin's testimony about it—are on the public record. But Butler ignores them. Nowhere in his book do we find any meaningful reference to the intelligence that revealed how misguided Martin's wishful thinking was. Nor do we learn how the evacuation itself began to suffer as Martin and so many others became increasingly preoccupied with their hopes for a last-minute political fix.

Butler attempts to enliven his narrative by lacing it with second-hand quotes and reconstructed conversations. But his sources' amazing capacity for total recall seems to give way to a convenient amnesia whenever Martin's reputation is at stake. In describing a

scene on the day of the pullout itself, when Martin foolishly resisted calling in the helicopters, Butler claims to be unable to pin down the facts because (as he puts it) "nine years later, memories are dim" and records "sketchy." Another unflattering anecdote about the ambassador he dismisses by saying simply, "Someone sure as hell was lying."

In the same uncritical spirit, Butler dutifully echoes Martin's own alibis for error and inaction. He reminds us that any premature rush to the choppers could have sparked panic in Saigon, as if that excused Martin's failure to tidy up our evacuation plans. Butler also notes that the Soviets secretly assured Kissinger a week before the collapse that there was hope for a limited *American* evacuation and a negotiated settlement. What Butler fails to make clear is that both Martin and Kissinger took this to mean that we had at least *two* weeks for an orderly withdrawal of Americans and Vietnamese under some sort of mediated arrangement. Butler also neglects to tell us that Martin and Kissinger had every reason to doubt these Soviet assurances, which, in fact, turned out to be wrong.

As I have written in my own Vietnam memoir, a top intelligence agent had just confirmed to me that the Communists meant to begin their final drive against Saigon in one week's time under cover of air and artillery strikes. The agent had also repeated earlier warnings that "there will be no negotiations or any form of tripartite government." This report reached the White House shortly before Kissinger heard from the Soviets. Unfortunately, he chose to disregard it and to believe them. So did Martin. Seven days later, on schedule, the predicted air and artillery assault materialized, forcing us to dash for the choppers far earlier than Martin or Kissinger had imag-

ined—and causing us to abandon thousands of our Vietnamese allies.

In the end, a bunch of blustery U.S. military officers, backed by some courageous young embassy officials, defied Martin's orders and saved the evacuation from total disaster by ramming onto cargo planes and finally helicopters any Vietnamese who was handy and scared. Butler draws on previously published accounts and interviews to trace the exploits of several of these intrepid Americans; but, instead of recognizing their daring for what it was, he disparages them as ignorant "aggressive young ac-

tivists," and, in a final incredible twist of logic, suggests that what they did was all part of a grand scheme masterminded by Graham Martin!

Butler's book, finally, is so highly partisan that it sometimes strikes me as being disingenuous. Even if there were no other histories of this period, Martin's own congressional testimony, as well as public records from the CIA and other government agencies, should have cast doubt on much of what Butler writes about the last American officials in Saigon. His certitude in defense of so many disputed assumptions reminds me chillingly that we still have much to learn from our Vietnam experience. Vietnam was, after all, an old man's war and a young man's tragedy. The irony is that young men like Butler can continue to be seduced by the old men's rationales.

Snepp is the author of "Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam" (Random House). Because of the 1980 Supreme Court ruling, Snepp vs. U.S., he submitted this article to the CIA for censorship.